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**Departments of Game and Fish, Environment, and Energy, Minerals & Natural Resources to
Argue Case for Protecting Valle Vidal's Waters Against Potential Development**

(Santa Fe, NM) — New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD) and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMGF) officials will present the state Water Quality Control Commission arguments for why the Valle Vidal's waters should be protected at a hearing on Tuesday, December 13.

The hearing will take place at the **PERA Building, Apodaca Hall, 1120 Paseo de Peralta, Santa Fe**. While the Commission meeting begins at 9 a.m., the hearing is the last item on the agenda, so the start time is dependent on the duration of preceding items, but could start as early as 11:00 a.m. and possibly carry over to the next day.

"The Valle Vidal's high mountain meadows, open grasslands and headwater streams are truly unique features in New Mexico and worthy of conservation to ensure they are not degraded in pursuit of energy development," NMED's Secretary Ron Curry said. "That is why Governor Richardson has made protecting this important natural area a top priority."

"Rio Costilla and Comanche, Ponil, and McCrystal creeks serve irreplaceable ecological functions for New Mexicans and wildlife, including important native trout populations and the state's largest elk herd," he said. "We hope to ensure that these streams maintain their ecological integrity and continue to provide recreational opportunities and good, quality water for the people who depend on it downstream for years to come."

NMED, EMNRD and NMGF and are co-petitioners in an effort to designate the waters of the 100,000-acre National Forest land as Outstanding National Resource Waters (ORNW), a designation under the state's water quality standards that gives New Mexico the authority to protect special waters against further degradation.

The U.S. Forest Service is currently considering a proposal by Texas-based El Paso Corp. to open the eastern 40,000-acres of the Valle Vidal to coal-bed methane natural gas development.

This summer while visiting the Valle Vidal, Governor Bill Richardson announced that he would seek to protect the Valle Vidal's water against potential degradation from proposed energy development by seeking ONRW status, while pledging to keep energy development out.

If approved by the Commission, ONRW status would mean no degradation of water quality would be allowed in any of the Valle Vidal's waters, putting strict restrictions on any proposed energy development there.

The Water Quality Control Commission could choose to make a decision on the Valle Vidal's ONRW status at the close of the hearing. In order to be designated as ONRW, the Commission must find that such a designation would be beneficial to the state and that either the waters are part of a gold medal trout fishery, provide exceptional recreational or ecological significance or the water quality is equal to or better than criteria established to protect aquatic life, recreation or human health.

The Commission will hear public comment at various points throughout the hearing, as well as technical comments from the co-petitioners.

A draft copy of the state's petition to designate the Valle Vidal's waters as ONRW can be found at <http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us>. The draft petition was open for public comment until September 30. Information on the hearing and the Water Quality Control Commission can be found at <http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/wqcc/index.html>.

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